

Naval War College Review

Volume 55
Number 3 *Summer*

Article 13

2002

We Come Unseen

Nigel West

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

West, Nigel (2002) "We Come Unseen," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 55 : No. 3 , Article 13.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol55/iss3/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

worked for him, and all indications are that he demanded the same of himself.

One comes away from this biography with an appreciation for Rickover's accomplishments in the Navy but with no understanding of the man. Rickover certainly left an enduring and immensely valuable legacy, but Duncan should have been fully open and fair, reporting all the pertinent aspects of his life. A biography should neither unduly venerate nor unjustly condemn. Duncan comes perilously close to writing a hagiography. Most readers would have much preferred honesty and a more complete depiction of the complex human being Hyman Rickover was.

WILLIAM S. MURRAY
Lieutenant Commander, U.S. Navy
Naval War College



Ring, Jim. *We Come Unseen*. London: John Murray, 2001. 270pp. £20

Books about submarines are generally disapproved of, unless they are technical volumes describing the characteristics and performance of potentially hostile fleets. A couple of recent accounts of American operations have run into shallow water. For example, Roger Dunham was obliged to censor much of his *Spy Sub* (Naval Institute Press, 1996) and conceal the fact that he had served on the USS *Halibut* on classified projects, one of which was the discovery of the wreck of a Soviet submarine in the Pacific. Exercising discretion, Dunham called his boat *Viperfish* and never identified the *K-219*, the Soviet Golf II that went down in 1968 with ballistic missiles aboard and became the target of a celebrated CIA salvage operation, code-named JENNIFER.

Two years later, Dunham's efforts to comply with the demands of the U.S. Navy to protect *Halibut* proved counterproductive when Sherry Sontag, Christopher Drew, and Annette Lawrence Drew published their best-selling *Blind Man's Bluff: The Untold Story of American Submarine Espionage* (PublicAffairs, 1998). Their detailed description of the eavesdropping and other secret operations conducted by *Halibut* over many years had clearly been informed by inside sources. Finally, John Pina Craven, formerly the chief scientist with the U.S. Navy's Special Projects program, released *The Silent War: The Cold War Battle beneath the Sea* (Simon & Schuster, 2001), giving more details of *Halibut's* activities and providing his own astonishing explanation of the loss of the *K-219*. According to Craven, the Soviet submarine's commander had been preparing for a rogue missile launch aimed at Hawaii when his vessel sustained a sudden, catastrophic accident that sent it plunging to the sea floor.

Until recently, such disclosures have been uniquely American, with almost nothing released in England about the Royal Navy's nuclear partnership with its U.S. cousins or about its contributions to the clandestine combat fought in the Arctic against the "boomers" (ballistic-missile submarines) of the Red Banner Northern Fleet. That silence has now been broken by Jim Ring, who marks the British submarine service's centenary with remarkable revelations about the cat-and-mouse games played off Murmansk, the extraordinary phenomenon of "ice damage" (a euphemism for underwater collision), as well as the deployment of hunter-killer submarines to the South Atlantic in 1982 during the Falklands War.

Possessing a relatively small fleet of submarines, at least in comparison to the United States, Britain requires its boats to fulfill several different roles. The smaller diesel-electrics are equipped to support teams of the Special Boat Squadron (SBS), who train continuously to perfect their covert infiltration skills and develop new techniques to counter terrorists and drug smugglers. The Poseidon-armed deterrent force undertakes long patrols and generally avoids surfacing so as to maintain a credible threat to a potential aggressor. For the hunter-killers, the task has been to shadow potential targets, raise antennas in dangerous waters to collect signals intelligence, and occasionally make goodwill visits to carefully selected ports to reinforce diplomatic messages.

Thus a courtesy invitation in Rio de Janeiro to the Argentine naval attaché to come aboard and enjoy a drink had a very specific objective; it certainly made clear the wisdom of not attempting to mount any amphibious landings on disputed territories in the region. This useful exercise was executed with total success in 1977, when HMS *Dreadnought* participated in Operation JOURNEYMAN, now regarded as a classic of deterrence. Unfortunately there was no time to repeat it in 1982 before General Leopoldo Galtieri seized the opportunity to launch a surprise invasion of the Falklands.

While much has been published concerning the Falklands War, two aspects have remained under wraps. First, there is the vexed question of what nuclear munitions were temporarily lost when the destroyer *Coventry* and the frigates *Antelope* and *Ardent* were sunk by Argentine aircraft in San Carlos Water. Such issues are never debated in public

in Britain, although reports have circulated of specialist divers engaged in the recovery of atomic depth charges. The second aspect, usually touched upon only when HMS *Conqueror* is referred to as the submarine responsible for sinking the cruiser *General Belgrano*, concerns the mission of that submarine and the other four attack boats that played unseen roles in the conflict. Where were *Valiant*, *Spartan*, and *Splendid*? They too were making a vital contribution, monitoring enemy aircraft from the Argentine mainland and giving valuable two-hour warnings of air raids. As for the diesel-powered *Onyx*, which took a month to reach the Total Exclusion Zone, its plan was to drop a team of SBS saboteurs near Rio Grande, the base from which the Exocet-equipped Super Etendards had flown to sink HMS *Sheffield*, the first major British casualty of the war. In the end, however, Operation MIKADO was handed over to the Special Air Service, which planned to crash-land two C-130s on the runway and then have the raiders escape to Chile. The idea was abandoned as suicidal.

The Falklands conflict provided plenty of firsts. *General Belgrano* was the first enemy ship sunk by a British submarine since the end of the Second World War; the sinking (with old Mark 8 torpedoes, in preference to the wire-guided Tigerfish) was a turning point in the war, effectively bottling up the entire Argentine navy in port. *Valiant* was at sea a record 101 days, and the jettisoning of unexpended ordnance upon it by Argentine aircraft returning to their base amounted to the first (unintentional) air attack on any nuclear submarine. The submarines' warnings of Argentine sorties, sent from dangerously shallow water to the task force, took just two minutes to reach

their destination with the aid of a satellite link. The early warning provided by the submarines saved many lives and was critical in giving air superiority to the British liberators of the islands. The Argentine air raids were countered by short-legged but deadly Sea Harriers armed with the latest Sidewinders, which proved to be impressive weapons.

Doubtless there is more to be revealed about the adventures of a handful of British submarine officers who survived the notoriously demanding "Perisher" command course to play tag with their Soviet opponents and fight the Argentine junta. Who could have foreseen a submarine service playing such a role?

NIGEL WEST

European editor of the World Intelligence Review and editorial director of Saint Ermin's Press Berks, England



Harris, Brayton. *The Navy Times Book of Submarines: A Political, Social and Military History*. New York: Berkley Books, 1997. 398pp. \$15

This historical book is a compilation of thousands of facts surrounding the evolutionary development of today's modern submarine. In an effort to separate fiction from fact, Captain Harris (U.S. Navy, Ret.) debunks many commonly held myths that have been perpetuated in submarine lore.

With twenty-four years of active duty service, Harris is well suited to speak on these matters. The huge number of facts interlaced throughout this work is evidence in itself of the thoroughness of his research. Harris has also written *The Age of the Battleship, 1890–1922*, and a study of the role of the newspaper during the American Civil War that appeared in the

magazine of the Civil War Society, *Civil War*. He has written for the *Saturday Review* and the U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*.

This book begins with the late sixteenth century. Little-known names like William Bourne, Frederico Gianibelli, and Cornelius Drebbel are joined by that of Robert Boyle (formulator of Boyle's Law) in the development of submarine craft. While Gianibelli carried out the first successful wartime assault using submerged explosives, Drebbel is credited with the first craft capable of transporting men and equipment underwater. Here begins Harris's correction of folklore. Drebbel's craft, rowed by twelve strong men, did not actually operate submerged, but awash. The boat's submerged operations became such a fish story that a hundred years after the event, it was claimed that King James I himself had ventured underwater in Drebbel's craft. Harris puts the matter right.

Harris points out two issues that plague military inventors. First, wars create necessity; without the threat of war, there is no drive to create new technology. Second, bureaucratic inertia is extremely difficult to overcome. Interest in these "infernal machines" would wax and wane depending upon the state of political and military unrest. Inventors and capitalists had to become politicians to find support within their governments; it required the patience of Job to wait for a bureaucrat to provide the necessary financial backing.

This work is more than a history of the mechanical evolution of submarines; it also discusses the legal matters surrounding naval warfare. Harris tells how Confederate president Jefferson Davis invited ordinary citizens to become privateers, including (and especially)